

Current planning priorities in rural villages in Malaysia: learning from the new Malaysian Village Action Plans

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Abstract

The Village Action Plan strategy, initiated in Malaysia in 2007, is a federal government initiative intended to help villages design their own plans to assist development. Initial work to develop the most appropriate ways of encouraging participation in planning with 17 villages in all parts of Malaysia enables identification of local priorities. A further 200 villages are planned to have constructed their action plans by the end of 2009. This paper is based on the analysis of reports from workshops held in the 17 villages in which action plans have been already been prepared by villagers permits the identification of common priorities and preoccupations in a range of localities in East and West Malaysia. The analysis shows the relative importance given by villagers to improving farming output and its sustainability, protecting village social environment and strengthening livelihoods for all village households. Malaysia's rapid economic progress over recent decades poses special challenges in many rural areas. It is valuable, therefore, to identify rural people's priorities, in particular relating to farming activities and to compare this recent Malaysian evidence with that from some other south-east Asian countries as well as south-west China.

Introduction

In Malaysia, the launching of The Village Action Plan by the Prime Minister on 29 January 2009 marks a new phase of rural planning. The Village Action Plan is supposed to be a bottom up approach to involve active participation of village communities in planning and delivery of actions to improve their wellbeing. As mentioned by Moseley (2002), the active involvement of local and rural communities in planning is increasingly emphasized by governments in developed countries. In Malaysia, the efforts began in mid 1990s when the government launched a new philosophy of rural development, giving emphasis on human development. The main program under this new initiative is the Visionary Village Movement requiring village community to plan and initiate rural development programs. Early initiatives involved training or capacity building of the rural leaderships i.e. the Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK) in the planning and management of the village activities and projects. The approach is relatively new in Malaysia, although the concept of community participation has been emphasized since independence. The Rural Action Plan is a planning document which contains statements about problems and development potential of a village, vision and objectives, and development

proposals in the form of projects, programmes, to solve problems and to achieve development objectives of the village. The document also has maps and diagrams to support and clarify the proposals together with justifications of proposals, target group, method and timeframe of implementation and cost.

This first part of the paper presents, an overview of rural planning in Malaysia, the concept and methodology of rural action plan. The second part presents case studies of rural action planning in 17 pioneer villages. The final part highlights some of the lessons learned from the pioneer work of participatory approach in the rural action plan.

Overview of Rural Planning in Malaysia

Participatory approach in planning of a village community is something new in Malaysia although the practice of village planning can be traced back since 1940s during the colonial period. A massive exercise of rural planning can be discerned from the development of resettlements schemes in Malaya during the Emergency Period (in late 1940s and 1950s). The establishment of resettlement schemes, commonly known as “new villages” involved forced resettlement of the population from scattered villages in rural areas, rubber plantations and tin mining regions. The new villages were planned for security reasons and carried out in a rush, to curb communist insurgents from approaching scattered villages for recruits or logistic support (Voon and Khoo, 1986). The resettlement schemes were considered more organized in terms of physical arrangement of buildings and had proper infrastructure and facilities compared to traditional villages. The planning and development of New Villages were under military command and thus, no participation was expected from the people.

During initial the period after independence, rural development started with programmes for the provision of basic infrastructure and facilities and some initial programmes for addressing poverty and land hunger. Given various constraints and shortages, a planning mechanism called the ‘Red Book’ was introduced to plan, coordinate development implementation and receive information from the grassroots with regard to the development of existing rural settlement. The Red Book was basically a district rural development plan manual, containing instructions on how to prepare a rural district plan including the setting and working of the District Rural Development Committee, procedures of plan preparation, sectoral policy to be considered in the preparation of development programmes and projects, costing and responsibility for implementing the plan. The methodology of the Red Book was very effective, the approach brought together top-down and bottom-up planning (Ibrahim Ngah, 2009). In line with this approach of rural development, a structure of district development machinery was set up such as the Village Development and Security Committee (or JKKK) and the District Rural Development Committee. However, the involvement of rural people was limited in which only heads of villages were expected to voice up the needs of the villagers to the district office as input to be incorporated in the plan.

As for the planning of new settlement, in particular the development of new land development schemes under Federal Land development Authority (FELDA) and State Development Corporations, the planning was done by the respective agencies. FELDA for instance seek assistance from the Federal Town and Country planning to prepare the physical layout plan for the settlements. The new settlement planning was basically a design exercise done by professionals without participation from the public.

During 1970 to 1990, rural development was carried on massive scale cover a region, designated under Regional Development Authorities (RDAs). Rural planning was then a regional plan. Regional rural plans under RDAs were basically comprehensive plan covering a packages of program for development of agriculture, new settlements, infrastructure and institutions in resource frontier areas such as KEJORA, DARA, JENGKA, KETENGAH and KESEDAR, and Integrated Agriculture Development programs for existing rural settlements such as in PERDA, KEDA, and KEMUBU. Due to its scale, complexities and shortage of local expertise, the government engaged foreign consultants to do planning studies and prepare plan for the regions. The planning of such regions did not involve local participation, except in some social economic surveys conducted to examine social economic conditions of the respective regions and its surrounding areas.

Another aspect of rural planning is the regrouping scheme of Orang Asli, the aboriginal groups in Peninsular, living in forest areas and numbering around 120,000 in 2000. The development of Orang Asli schemes began in 1977, which involved regrouping of the Orang Asli into a centralized village within or close to their traditional homeland. The schemes include provision of basic facilities such as a primary school, health clinic, housing and some form of income generating activities such as rubber and palm oil cultivation (Nicolas, 2000). In some schemes the cultivation of crops were carried out together with FELCRA who managed the plantation on a cooperative system. There were 18 regrouping schemes developed for the whole of Peninsular Malaysia involving about 10,000 Orang Asli. Planning of the schemes was done by The Department of Orang Asli Affairs. The planning was more of top-down approach although some reflection or studies were done to take into account to needs of the community.

The Village Action Plan

The Village Action Plan is an initiative under a programme called “Gerakan Daya Wawasan” (Visionary Capability Movement) emphasizing the empowerment of rural people in planning and implementing development projects in their own village. The Institute for Rural Advancement (INFRA) is responsible for training of village leaders such as The Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK) for preparation of village action plan. The earlier phase of training was conducted in classroom environment where a few members of JKKK in each village were invited to participate in the training program at the INFRA campus. During the training session, participants were given input on how to prepare village action plan such as the preparation of basic statistics about village profiles, identification of problems and solutions. The training was conducted based on a standard module with workshop sessions focusing on how to fill information on the standard templates of problem solving and project planning exercises.

The classroom training approach was found to be not effective in which after several years of training, there were no plans prepared by the JKKK. Among the factors identified by INFRA are as follows:

- The persons who attended the training program were not key persons or key members of JKKK such as the Head of Village/Chairman, Secretary, and those who lead the development portfolio of the JKKK.

- The classroom training was too theoretical and did not relate to real problems of the village.
- Too few people attended the program and did not represent the various interest groups in the village.

Based on the limitation of the classroom training, INFRA has decided to introduce a new approach which incorporate training with application to actual plan making and implementation. The training will be carried out at each village and involve various stake holders in the villages, such as JKKK, entrepreneurs, farmers, women, youth, NGOs, teachers etc. The target number of participants for each village is 40 with the estimated budget of RM5000 for the plan making stage.

Four stages of the village action plan process include:

- Preliminary works such as informing the village head/JKKK about the programme and gathering basic information on village profiles.
- Plan making stage.
- Implementation.
- Monitoring and review.

The Formulation of village action plan in 17 pioneer villages

The pioneer project involved collaboration with three parties i.e. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), INFRA and village communities. UTM was responsible to prepare a module, advice on procedure for plan making and facilitate in some of the workshop sessions. INFRA was responsible to organize the meeting, facilitate the workshop sessions, provide logistic support, assist the workshop process and prepare the documentation after the workshop. The community role is to participate in a series of brainstorming sessions for plan making and implementing the plan that they agreed upon. Several visits were made to the villages with regard to plan making and review of the progress. In the process of implementation there were many contacts and meetings made between INFRA and JKKK.

Pre-Workshop Visit

The pre-workshop visit was made to explain the village head and JKKK on the way the workshop would be conducted, the people expected to attend the workshop and other logistic arrangements. The team was also briefed by village head on the background of the village, members of JKKK and activities that they normally organized. We also discussed on the venue for the workshop and how the tables and chairs were to be arranged so that it would be suitable for brainstorming sessions and small group discussions.

The workshop Process

The workshop was divided into few sessions in which each session took about two hours each and in between the sessions there was a break for tea or lunch. All the workshops in the 17 villages were done during the weekend. We found that the village people were more willing to organize meetings during Saturday and Sunday where many villagers were at home. The schedule for the plan making process is shown in Table 2. But there were some amendments to the timing during the actual running of the workshops depending on the progress and situation during the workshops.

Table 2: Schedule for Workshop activities

Day/Time	Activities
<u>Saturday</u> 8.30am -9.30am 9.30am-10.00am 10.00am-12.00 noon 12.00-12.30pm 12.30 pm-2.00pm 2.00pm-4.00pm 4.00pm 8.30pm-10.30pm	Lecture input on how to prepare Village Action Plan Tea break Workshop 1: Identification of village problems and potentials Presentation Lunch and rest Workshop 2: Development of vision and objective of Village development Tea and rest Formulation of proposal to solve problems and proposal to achieve objectives
<u>Sunday</u> 8.30am-10.30am 10.30am-11.00am 11.00am-12.00 noon	Detail planning for a few priority projects Tea break Presentation

During the workshop, all participants were given opportunities to voice their view. To reach consensus on particular aspects of discussions, such as to rank the importance of the village problems and to reach agreement on village vision and objectives, we used the voting system. For example from the list of problems identified during brainstorming exercise, every participants has to choose the 3 most important and then the total number of participants voted for the problems that will be counted. In this way we found that it took less time to reach consensus or agreement for aspects that have differences in opinions.

The Output of the Workshop

The output of the workshops include listing of the village problems and potential according to its importance, the statement of vision and objectives, formulation of proposal to solve the problems and proposal to achieve the development objectives. For a few main projects identified, the detail proposal including the objective and rational of the projects, target group, elements/components of the project, methods of implementation and costing were also produced. We found that the village people were very familiar to the detail project planning because some of them were already involved in developing proposal for village projects and in implementing the development. Table 3 and 4 shows some of the output from the workshops of the 17 villages.

There are variations in problems identified for the 17 villages. Some similarities are in term of development proposals such as physical improvement of the village, and social activities.

The concerns most frequently prioritised by villagers attending the workshops related to land, the alienation of young village people, lack of maintenance to village basic infrastructure, shortage of recreational facilities and social facilities. Land is important because some land is no longer farmed but villagers do not necessarily have access to it, and other unused land needs to be made legally available to village people. These land issues were articulated in 8 of the 17 villages (47%). These concerns about land link with the second concern – the alienation of the young people - and villagers argued that if land were available for them to farm they might feel better able to take a fuller part in village life.

A further concern in relation to the social environment, besides the apparent alienation of young people, is lack of social cohesion, sometimes expressed by a concern concerning falling attendance at the village mosque but also in other ways. In 10 of the 17 communities (59%) one or other of these social cohesion issues were highlighted.

Strengthening household livelihoods underlies a range of other priorities that emerge from village workshops. While there is concern with the possibility of more direct marketing of village produce to shorten supply chains and obtain a greater share of the market value, there is also interest in attracting tourists to visit the villages to enjoy the local environment from more than half of the villages.

No explicit mention is made of other forms of livelihood diversification such as obtaining non-agricultural work in nearby cities or industrial areas. Such changes are increasingly discussed in the rural sociology literature as part of the debate about post-productivism and the decoupling of agriculture from many rural household livelihoods which is discussed by various authors in relation to south-east Asia. One recent paper indeed refers to ‘rural villages as socially urban spaces’ in Malaysia. Evidence from informal interviews by the authors in many Malaysian villages indicates a growing complexity in the linkages between village people and urban areas. Further research is now needed to determine the extent to which the concerns voiced in workshops to design action plans represent the interests of all households.

Table 3: Problems of concern from Village Action Plan Workshop

Problem	Villages	Frequency (%)
Physical		
Flood	Kuala Kuang; Parit Tengah; Sarang Buaya; Talantang	4 (23.5%)
Lack of facilities for recreation (sport, playing field)	Kuala Kuang; Padang Dan; Sg Purun; Kubang Telaga; Kg Chabang; Parit Tengah; Kg Kanka; Talantang	8 (47.1%)
Irrigation problem	Padang Dan; Kubang Telaga; Talantang;	3 (17.6%)
Road and infrastructure not well maintain, e.g. hole, no hard surface, drainage, no bus stop	Kuala Kuang; Kg Baru Air Kuning; Sg Purun; Kubang Telaga; Teratak Batu; Kg. Chabang; Kuala Medang; Kg Syafie; kg Kanka; Telantang;	10 (58.8%)
Street lighting not sufficient	Kg Matang Acheh; parit tengah; Sarang Buaya	3 (17.6%)

Lack of social facilities (Post Office, clinic, library, Community Hall)	Kg Baru Air Kuning; Kubang Telaga; Kg Chabang; Tg Gahai; Kuala Tembeling; Kg Syafie; Kg Kanka	7 (41.2%)
No Place for garbage disposal; no garbage collection	Kg Baru Air Kuning; Kuala Tembeling	2 (11.8%)
Air Pullution	Sg Purun	1 (5.9%)
Water supply problem	Kubang Telaga; Teratak Batu; Kg Syafie; Kg Kanka	4 (23.5%)
No public bus services	Kubang Telaga; Sg Purun	2 (11.8%)
Water Pollution (river)	Kuala Medang; Talantang	2 (11.8%)
Need for bridge; road too narrow	Kuala Tembeling; Parit Tengah; Sarang Buaya; Kg Kanka; Talantang	5 (29.4%)
Electricity problem	Kg Syafie; Parit Tengah	2 (11.8%)
Telecommunication/ cell phone no line	Peruas; Kg Kanka	2 (11.8%)
ICT repair/maintenance	Parit Tengah	1 (5.9%)
<u>Economy</u>		
Idle land	Kuala Kuang; Padang Dan, Tg Gahai	3 (17.6%)
Crop destroyed by wild animal e.g. Monkey, wild bores	Kuala Kuang; Padang Dan; Kuala Tembeling	3 (17.6%)
Lack of capital to develop land	Kuala Kuang; Padang Dan; Peruas	3 (17.6%)
Lack of skills	Kuala Kuang; Padang Dan	2 (11.8%)
Lack of employment opportunities; insufficient income sources for second generation	Kg Matang Aceh; Kuala Medang; Kg Syafie; Kg Kanka; Talantang	5 (29.4%)
Difficulty to market village product, e.g. vegetables, fruits	Kuala Kuang; Peruas;	2 (11.8%)
No Pasture place (<i>padang ragut</i>); animal free around village	Kg Padang Dan; Teratak Batu; Kuala Kuang;	3 (17.6%)
No land for future development (Government land)	Kg Matang Aceh; Sg Purun; Teratak Batu; Kuala Medang; Tg. Gahai; Kg Syafie; Peruas; Talantang	8 (47.1%)
Poverty	Kubang Telaga	1 (5.9%)
<u>Social</u>		
Youth not interested to participate in village activities; not active	Kuala Kuang; Kg Baru Air Kuning; Kubang Telaga	3 (17.6%)
Problems related to youth/adolescents such as motorcycle racing	Kg Matang Aceh; Parit Tengah; Sarang Buaya	3 (17.6%)
Drug abuse and theft	Kg Baru Air Kuning; Kubang Telaga; Kuala Medang; Peruas	4 (23.5%)
Children safety e. g . crossing road; road safety	Kg Baru Air Kuning; Kuala Tembeling; Chabang	2 (11.8%)
Present of many foreign workers	Sg Purun	1 (5.9%)
Lack of women participation in economic activities	Kubang Telaga	1 (5.9%)
No continuation traditional heritage/culture	Kubang Telaga	1 (5.9%)
Falling attendance of village mosque	Kubang Telaga; Teratak Batu; Tg Gahai; Sarang Buaya	4 (23.5%)
Lack participation from educated people	Teratak Batu	1 (5.9%)
Problem of getting corporation among villagers	Kg Chabang; Teratak Batu; Kuala Medang; Sarang Buaya	4 (23.5%)

No place for cultural activities	Talantang	1 (5.9%)
<u>Government Agency</u>		
Lack of corporation	Teratak Batu	1 (5.9%)
Slow process of the appointment of Head of MUKIM	Kuala Tembeling	1 (5.9%)
Land Alienation problem	Kuala Tembeling; Kg Syafie	2 (11.8%)

Table 4: Development Proposals from Village Action Plan Workshop

Development Proposal	Villages	Frequency (%)
<u>Economy</u>		
Development of idle land for agriculture	Kuala Kuang; Padang dan; Kg Syafie; Gahai	4 (23.5%)
Establish rural product collection centre; marketing	Kuala Kuang; Kg Baru Air Kuning	2 (11.8%)
Tourism/ homestay/agro tourism	Matang Acheh; Kg Baru Air Kuning; Sg Purun; Kubang Telaga; Kuala Medang; Tg Gahai; Kg Syafie; Peruas; Sarang Buaya; Kanka;	11 (64.7%)
Agriculture project, vegetable gardening; orchard; herbs	Teratak Batu; Chabang; Kuala Medang; Talantang; Gahai	5 (29.4%)
Facilitate development of small industries and its facilities; downstream activities	Padang Dan; Matang Acheh; Kg Baru Air Kuning; Kubang Telaga; Teratak Batu; Chabang; Kuala Medang; Tg Gahai; Kuala Tembeling; Kg Syafie; Parit Tengah;	11 (64.7%)
Form cooperative to buy land for agriculture	Matang Acheh	1 (5.9%)
Government to provide Capital, fertilizer for farmer; seeds	Kg Baru Air Kuning; Kubang Telaga;	2 (11.8%)
Skills training e.g. sewing, hand craft	Sungai Purun; Kg Syafie; Sarang Buaya;	3 (17.6%)
Animal farming; beef; dairy	Chabang; Kanka	2 (11.8%)
Produce organic fertilizer	Chabang	1 (5.9)
Aquacultures, fishing	Kuala Medang; Padang Dan; Tg Gahai; Kuala Tembeling; Parit Tengah; Sarang Buaya; Kanka; Gahai	8 (47.1%)
Allocate pasture area for animal farming	Kuala Tembeling	1 (5.9%)
<u>Social</u>		
Establish tuition centre; training program	Kuala Kuang; Matang Acheh; Sarang Buaya	3 (17.6%)
Community voluntary work (gotong Royong) for social activities; village beautification	Kuala Kuang; Padang Dan; Matang Acheh; Kg Baru Air Kuning; Sungai Purun; Kubang Telaga; Peruas	8 (47.1%)
Awareness program for youth; motivation camp	Kuala Kuang; Kg Baru Air Kuning; Teratak Batu	4 (23.5%)
Formation of youth club/society	Kuala Kuang; Peruas	2 (11.8%)
More regular meeting with village people; family day	Kuala Kuang; Sg Purun; Gahai	3 (17.6%)
Leadership Training	Padang Dan; Kg Syafie; Peruas	3 (17.6%)
Poverty eradication program	Matang Acheh	1 (5.9%)
Built a cultural centre	Chabang	1 (5.9%)
<u>Physical</u>		

Road and infrastructure improvement	Padang Dan; Kg Baru Air Kuning; Kg Syafie; Kanka	4 (23.5%)
Development of social facilities (e.g. community hall; sport; children play ground)	Padang Dan; Matang Acheh; Kg Baru Air Kuning; Sungai Purun; Kg Syafie; Parit Tengah; Sarang Buaya;Kanka	8 (47.1%)
Create Forest recreation area	Kuala Medang; Sarang Buaya	2 (11.8%)
Improve irrigation	Talantang	1 (5.9%)
Identify garbage disposal site	Talantang	1 (5.9%)
Landscaping; village beautification	Talantang; Sg Purun; Peruas; Kubang Telaga; Kuala Medang; Parit Tengah; Teratak Batu; Gahai	8 (47.1%)

Review of Progress

We have visited only Peruas village this year to monitor progress of the action plan. Based on a meeting and discussion with the head of village and JKKK, there is some progress with the implementation of the plan.

The problem with regard to the mobile phone line has been solved with the construction of a Maxis transmission antenna in the village. The persons to look into the cleanliness of the recreation area were appointed and they have taken some actions such as rubbish collection and putting signboards in the recreation area. The village also received a grant (RM200,000) from The Ministry of Rural and Regional Development for a tourism project as proposed in the plan. The construction of chalets was in progress during our visit last October.

Some of the proposals could not be carried out, such as the house beautiful competition, sport activities, cultural, and Quran classes due to the problem of manpower and participation from village's population. For example, in Peruas village there are not many young people available due out migration and organizing sports and cultural activities was very difficult. Many villagers are already occupied with their daily economic activities and other private functions such as marriage ceremony, religious ritual activities organized by individual households. Thus creating new activities would not attract people to participate.

In addition, the role of JKKK in organizing activities, informing and encouraging villagers to participate is also an important factor. From some interviews with village people in August 2009, we found that many village people in Kampung Peruas were not informed about the rural action plan being prepared and they also tended to perceive that any project initiated by JKKK tended to benefit a few people related to the JKKK. The JKKK on the other hand also complained that they have many things to perform apart from their routine jobs such as farming. Some of the JKKK also have other permanent job as government servants and teachers and they only perform their duty as JKKK on part-time basis.

Lessons for Sustainable Development

Experience from the pioneer projects of village action plan in Malaysia has shown that village people have the capability to participate in planning and implementing development projects in their villages according to their needs and aspirations. The knowledge and experiences that are available from various background of the people could be easily used and exchange in the

process of plan making and implementation if properly organized and facilitated. The outcome of the workshops revealed that village people were able to identify well balanced aspects of the development priorities, covering physical, economic and social and institutional dimensions including improving the village management and leaderships. This is very much in line with principles of sustainable development.

In term of sustainability in agriculture and innovation, there were evidence of prioritisation of village people towards diversification of farming and agriculture activities and also venturing into tourism to take advantage of rural resources and increasing demand for rural tourism.

The major problems in implementation were with regard to human resources due to outmigration of youths to urban areas and limited participation from villagers in the process of implementation. Measures need to be taken to overcome the problems through various programs to attract youths to participate in village economic activities. With the new tourism potential in the villages, village people particularly the young generation need to be trained in tourism related skills such as tourist guide, hospitality services, and souvenir products and catering. The government should also encourage implementation of village action plans through partnership with NGOs, education institutions and private sectors from outside the villages. For example, the mobilization of students from higher education institutions in the country through practical training programs will help to overcome some of the problems related to labor shortages.

The government agencies such as the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development need to channel more resources to finance projects in the villages, particularly those economic activities that potentially have high impacts on the villages and provide training to youths as well as monitoring of the progress of the village action plans.

Conclusion

The participatory approach in village planning seems to provide a new tool to encourage and empower village people to plan and implement development projects according to their needs and aspirations. The Malaysia government has launched the village action plan program in early 2009, as a national agenda and more villages are in the pipeline for participating in the program. This is an important step towards achieving sustainable village communities. We hope more lessons could be learned from this approach and share the experiences for the development of sustainable community in rural areas.

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